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ABSTRACT

An advanced writing course that does not repeat freshman English materials and techniques can encourage a variety of students to become enthusiastic about writing. One such course focuses on three writing modes: the poetic, the informative, and the persuasive. For the poetic mode, students write informal essays; for the informative mode, they write reviews; and for the persuasive mode, they write articles. These three types of nonfiction are prose forms that students will use in their adult lives, when they read and write for both pleasure and information. The course content relies heavily on the ideas of James Britton and James Kinneavy, who underscore the need for presenting discourse theory that describes communication as it is actually practiced, developing the relationship between the writer, the audience, their world, and the message. (RL)

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Advanced Composition: A Course for Students in All Disciplines

by

Roberta M. Palumbo

With the crisis in literacy we are now hearing cries for more composition courses at all levels--even the graduate.[1] Such suggestions underscore a pedagogical truth that we are just beginning to understand or that we no longer can afford to deny: Writing is not a skill that is learned once and for all. Or as James Britton of the University of London Institute of Education has said, "Written composition cannot be regarded as a single undifferentiated task." Speaking in March, 1977, at the University of California, Berkeley, he noted that one cannot take a global view of writing. It is not a skill a person can either do or not do. Different kinds of writing require different skills.

Certainly we must now accept as an axiom of our profession that writing needs guidance on every rung of the academic ladder. This revelation, however, forces us to ask these questions: 1) In an advanced composition course, how can we meet the needs of students in all disciplines, not only the English majors, the credential students, or technical writers? 2) How can we design an advanced writing course that does not repeat the materials of Freshman composition?

The research of James Britton is particularly helpful in designing a composition course that answers these two questions.

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During his presentation at the University of California, James Britton pointed out that the time-worn categories of narration, description, description, and argumentation[2] are inadequate as a means to describe the modes of written discourse. He and his research team have established a new paradigm of writing functions based on their assessment of writing done by 11-18 year olds in England.[3] They have gone to the real world of discourse and established these categories: the expressive, the transactional, and the poetic.

Expressive describes that writing which is the matrix from which all other writing comes; it is the form nearest speech, loosely structured and context bound. This form of writing is thinking aloud and assists students in generating and organizing ideas during the first stages of the composing process. More related to the revised essays our students produce are his two other categories, the transactional and the poetic. In the transactional mode the writer is playing the role of participant, using language for some direct purpose, some practical result--reporting, instructing, informing, theorizing. This category can be further divided into the informative and the conative or persuasive. In the poetic mode the writer is playing the role of spectator, using the language to make sense out of something that has happened, to narrate and evaluate experience in such a way that the reader will also experience it and appreciate it for its own sake.

For several reasons this research must be considered in developing an advanced composition course. We cannot

continue to utilize the traditional modes of discourse (and many texts still do) if they form an inaccurate map of the territory we wish our students to traverse. At the advanced composition level, moreover, it is even more crucial than at the freshman level to develop a writing program that reflects the kinds of discourse that students will encounter in the world outside the writing class. No longer can they continue to do warm up exercises in preparation for the real journey. Certainly in this respect Britton's function categories for writing are most instructive.

He is not alone, however, in calling for this redefinition of modes of writing. In the field of rhetoric James E. Kinneavy discusses similar categories: the expressive, the persuasive, the referential and the literary.[4] For advanced composition, Kinneavy's ideas underscore the necessity of finding a theory of discourse that relates to communication as it is actually practiced by human beings, the relationship among writer, audience, world, and message.[5]

Clearly both Britton and Kinneavy believe that each mode of discourse relates to a different kind of thinking about reality. Their findings support the thesis of I.A. Richards that "there are two totally distinct uses of language" and that "the difference between the mental processes involved in the two cases are very great."[6] There is the scientific, which relates to Britton's transactional mode and Kinneavy's referential and persuasive; and the emotive, which relates to Britton's poetic mode and Kinneavy's expressive and literary.

Thus we can say that writing is not a single, all encompassing ability. There are different modes of thought and therefore discourse, and it is our job as advanced composition teachers to give our students practice in these different modes of thought and writing. And by this I do not mean to continue the practice so popular in the teaching of freshman composition: using the poetic/expressive/literary modes for the first assignments as a spring board into the transactional/referencial/persuasive modes.[7] This practice denies what the recent research that I have briefly outlined has made clear.

Nor do I suggest that advanced composition should emphasize one mode to the exclusion of others and repeat the mistake of the late sixties when personal writing almost supplanted exposition. That students can write more successfully in one mode than another should not prohibit composition teachers from developing a student's ability to handle other modes.[8] Certainly, this is what advanced composition should do.

The course I have developed, therefore, focuses on types of non-fiction prose that correspond to two of the three modes described by Britton and discussed in similar terms by Kinneavy and Richards: the poetic and the transactional (further divided into the informative and persuasive). For the poetic mode, students write informal essays; for the informative mode, students write reviews; and for the persuasive mode, students write articles. They have read and will continue to read for pleasure and information all three of these prose forms.

Usually students have not experienced writing such prose forms and therefore find the course different from freshman composition. These types of prose, moreover, provide writing assignments that suit such diverse disciplines as music, business, psychology, engineering, or biology. Students choose the topics for each of the three types of writing assignments, relating them to the specific interests of their major.

It is a well-established fact now with the work of Wayne Booth,[9] W. Ross Winterowd,[10] and others that students write more effectively if they have a sense of audience. Each of these three types of prose has a well-defined audience. The student clearly understands his relationship to his readers; the format for each makes this knowledge explicit and binding. With assignments like these students learn to view writing as a useful tool, a means by which to communicate with others, and therefore will be better prepared to use writing effectively in the world outside the classroom.

Instruction in the course relies heavily on exploring what each type of writing entails, with a good deal of emphasis on explanation of specific formats, analysis of professional examples of each form, and discussion of the students' compositions. They read review and articles published in current periodicals, and informal essays written by such twentieth century masters as E.B. White, George Orwell, or James Baldwin. In reading the professionals

and discussing their writing, the emphasis is always on what makes an effective critical review, informal essay, or article.

The informal essay asks students to become, according to Britton's schema, spectators--to make sense out of experience and to communicate those perceptions to another. The purpose is aesthetic, to share feelings not to change minds. The informal essay has often been termed the most lyrical of the expository modes, so it is fitting that it relates to what Britton calls the poetic. Although epiphanal in nature, like E.B. White's "Once More to the Lake" or Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son," the informal essay remains essentially expository, more rigorous than the musings of journal keeping but less complicated than the demands of fiction. In relating their own experiences, moreover, students must apply such structural patterns as cause and effect or comparison and contrast, and such textual devices as metaphor or irony.

With the informal essay students observe their own lives. Like Montaigne, 'they are themselves the matter of their essays.' In writing about their personal experience, they not only come to understand that "everyman bears the whole stamp of the human condition." Experience becomes a means by which they discover certain kinds of truth about human existence. Certainly their viewing as spectator the forces that shape their lives helps students to mature

intellectually, to probe the moral and intellectual questions that they will face personally and professionally.

Britton divides the transactional mode into the informative and the persuasive; for each the writer plays the role of participant, formulating material to achieve some practical result. In the case of the review, the purpose is the transmission of information about a specific event. The activities of any academic community and its environs offer abundant possibilities: public lectures--popular or academic; musical or dramatic productions, art exhibits, workshops, rallies, conferences, exhibitions, and symposiums or a variety of other public functions. The students are asked to select events that relate in some way to their general interests and that they plan to attend anyway.

Because students evaluate an activity and communicate their perceptions honestly and tastefully to others, they learn to be intelligent participants not just passive absorbers. In addition, the assignment calls upon a number of skills crucial to any type of informational writing: observing, selecting, and organizing details; making valid generalizations; being analytical, logical but interesting; using an appropriate tone. In short, the review brings together in an assignment meaningful to each student the traditional forms of discourse often taught in freshman composition--exposition, narration, description, and argumentation.

Transactional, on the opposite end of the continuum from poetic, is a particularly illuminating label for the informative and persuasive modes. Both, according to Britton, require that the writer play the role of participant in the events of life rather than spectator. A writer using the persuasive mode is not only transmitting information but attempting to convince his readers of a particular point of view. Students, therefore, write argumentative articles on topics related to their concerns--academic or personal. They must use the techniques of research that they often study in freshman composition, but accommodate their material to the interests and needs of the audience they are trying to convince. In other words, they must take a rhetorical stance and learn "to discover the available means of persuasion in a given case."[11]

Certainly, this kind of persuasion teaches students how information as well as quotations, analogies, or anecdotes make ideas understandable, stimulating, and--most important for this mode--convincing. In discussing topics that necessitate value judgments, students learn how to build a point of view, artfully design a set of proofs. Gathering and organizing material is often considered an awesome yet meaningless task by many composition students; understandably, they have no intrinsic interest in the research process. Having students write this kind of persuasive article, however, provides this process with a purpose.

Most students have never worked extensively with the critical review, the informal essay, and the article. These three types of non-fiction prose challenge their intelligence, their critical faculties, their imagination; and focus their perceptions into prose forms that they will continue to read in magazines and journals, thus making them more intelligent readers as well as better writers. Because they write about topics concerning their personal experience, their discipline, or their cultural interests, the compositions are not assignments completed but interesting reading to be shared with others in the class. Students realize that writing well is an end in itself, a truly human potential to be developed.

We are not fulfilling our obligations as English teachers if we fail to offer courses in composition beyond the freshman level that encourage students from all disciplines to become interested in writing. Such students, moreover, should feel comfortable taking advanced composition, convinced that the course is truly advancing their writing skills. We do a great disservice to these students if we do not make such instruction available and appealing, particularly since our society increasingly demands that college graduates entering the job market be able to communicate on paper with precision and clarity. We must forestall the phenomenon of having the illiteracy of college educated individuals prevent them from filling positions of responsibility.[12]

Obviously, these upperdivision or post-graduate students have the specific and individual interests of their disciplines uppermost in their minds; they are soon to graduate and enter the job market; they have written many college papers and do not want to get back to basics even if their writing shows some need for further competence in mechanics, usage, or organization. An advanced composition course for such students, therefore, must use material that fits their academic interests, meets their expectations for an advanced writing course, and relates significantly to their future endeavors outside the classroom. It should not necessarily be a course in technical writing; its purpose and scope, as my model suggests, should be more humanistic.

By freeing advanced composition from a repetition of freshman materials, from only meeting the specialized needs of English majors, credential students, or technical writers, we encourage a variety of students to become enthusiastic about writing--not as a skill to be perfected by those in a few disciplines but as a craft cultivated by all majors, those entering any profession, all walks of life.

FOOTNOTES

[1]See H. R. Struck, "Wanted: More Writing Courses for Graduate Students," CCC (May, 1976), 192-97.

[2]Alexander Bain was the first to promulgate these modes of discourse in English Composition and Rhetoric, rev. American ed. (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1890).

[3]James Britton, et al., The Development of Writing Abilities 11-18 (London: Macmillan, 1975).

[4]James E. Kinneavy, "The Basic Aims of Discourse," CCC (Dec., 1969), 297-304.

[5]Kenneth Burke's Pentad (Act, Scene, Agent, Means, Purpose) is instructive also in this respect.

[6]I. A. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1949) pp. 261-68.

[7]A typical text is Regina M. Hoover, Making Your Writing Count: From Free Writing to Structural Composition (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1977).

[8]See Marlene Griffith, "Thoughts on Teaching Writing," CCC (Dec., 1974), 368-373 for an analysis of this problem.

[9]Wayne C. Booth, "The Rhetorical Stance," Teaching Freshman Composition, ed. Gary Tate and Edward P. J. Corbett (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

[10]W. Ross Winterowd, Rhetoric, A Synthesis (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968).

[11]Aristotle, The Rhetoric translated by Lane Cooper (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1960) p.6.

[12]See Linwood W. Orange, English: The Preprofessional Major, rev. ed. (New York: MLA, 1973).